



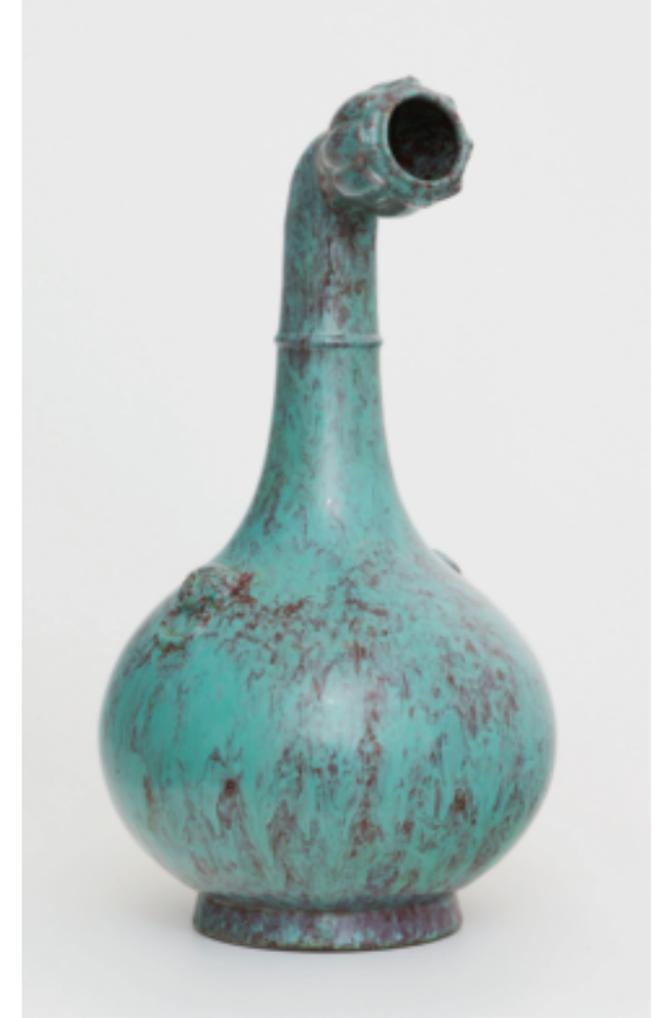
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Opposite: *Eternity—New 40403 Stone Statue, Aphrodite Holding Her Drapery*, 2016. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, and stainless steel, 109.44 x 23.64 x 23.64 in. This page: *Madeln Curved Vase—Blue-and-Jun Yao Glazed Lotus Seed-pod Vase, Qianlong Period, Qing Dynasty*, 2014. Porcelain, 12.19 x 6.69 x 6.69 in. Both produced by Madeln Company.

A Conversation with

Xu Zhen

Information Age



BY RAJESH PUNJ

Shanghai-based Xu Zhen reconstitutes time to create “information objects.” His sculptures appropriate historical elements from different civilizations but siphon them through an insurgence of new technologies, underscoring relationships between tradition and contemporary social experience—all in an attempt to sidestep culture as a “known experience” and breathe new life into what might otherwise be considered dead relics.

The monumentality of his recent sculptures inspires the kind of awe normally reserved for devotional statues. But the sometimes explicit combinations and substitutions—a Japanese figurine replacing a penis, African artifacts and Japanese sex dolls, couplings of Greek and Buddhist figures—result in strange, loaded motifs. Acts of apparent visual conflict and vandalism continually recalibrate historical, mythological, and artistic canons. Such bravado allows for inventive overlap in the interest of new configurations. Looking beyond the object as physical artifact, Xu intends to reactivate it as “information.” His understanding is fueled as much by technology’s democratization of information as it is by his appetite for insurrection. His subversions celebrate a new order of things. By intentionally exercising iteration until a motif is diluted of its original meaning, Xu fills the void with his own version of events.

Rajesh Punj: Do you see yourself more as an artist, interventionist, or entrepreneur?

Xu Zhen: I am an artist, from the perspective of the function of art, and an artist entrepreneur. I create, and I can do many other things.

RP: In terms of the scale of your operation, with your multi-disciplinary studios, how do you effectively involve yourself in everything? Or have you arrived at the point where you instruct others to create your works?

XZ: From 1999 to 2010, I was the art director of a nonprofit art center in Shanghai. During that time, I organized hundreds of exhibitions involving hundreds of artists, and as one of many people in charge of the art space, I worked with everyone. I gave my advice, and we solved problems together, while respecting the artist's original idea. In 2006, together with a few other artists, I established an Internet media company called Art-Ba-Ba, and within two years, it became the most active art forum on the Internet, a place where curators, artists, and art professionals were able to actively engage with one another. And by virtue of all these years of work, I have acquired, together with my colleagues, a certain amount of experience and a network of contacts.

This led, in 2014, to the establishment of MadelN Gallery, which we intended to use as a model to promote young emerging artists. With the Xu Zhen brand (established in 2013), I am responsible for art direction and objectives, while there are various professional staff responsible for the management, production, quality control, transport, insurance, promotion, and commercial activities that accompany the brand's development.

RP: Were your early video works such as *Rainbow* (1998) and *Shouting* (1998) meant to be political?

XZ: *Rainbow* (1998) presents the process of beating a human being's back until it becomes red; the aggressor's hands have been removed, but the sound of the slaps can still be heard. *Shouting* (1998) presents different crowded places, captured by individuals with cameras; they shout loudly until the people being photographed all turn their heads toward the camera. These works don't have any direct or concrete political motives.



Left: *Evolution—Statue Mbole Ofika*, Misaka Mikoto, 2016. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, stainless steel, and aluminum, 118.13 x 39.36 x 35.44 in. Right: *Evolution—Statue Mbole Ofika*, Tatenashi Sarashiki, 2016. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, stainless steel, and aluminum, 118.16 x 35.44 x 35.44 in. Both produced by MadelN Company.

RP: What drew you to conceive of a nonprofit space while establishing yourself as an artist?

XZ: I was lucky in that when I started to create works, there wasn't really an art system in China. Creating works and running an art space were both new to me and therefore very attractive.

RP: Were you as determined to curate your own work as you were to curate that of your contemporaries?

XZ: I am not interested in curating as such. I am more engaged with how to express our attitudes and thoughts through exhibitions. At a particular moment, I was interested in an audience that had never seen contemporary art, that was interested in seeing how a group of artists would evolve.

RP: I used the word "entrepreneur" earlier because of your interest in involving a whole new generation of artists in your cooperative approach and practice. Do you feel a responsibility to catch everything creative from everyone around you?

XZ: Entrepreneurship is the best form of practice to create profit, and the profits from the brand Xu Zhen and MadelN Company are channeled back into art to make it bigger. All of the meaning of our work is built on this basis.

RP: As a result, does your work speak for a generation and not just for you as an individual?

XZ: I will become a turning point.

RP: At Galerie Perrotin, you demonstrated an incredible ability to move between mediums and sizes. Are you as absorbed by these choices as you are by the message?

XZ: I like to use different materials for different works. I don't have any restrictions about size, just as I don't have any restrictions on my imagination or on plans for the next creation.

RP: With MadelN Company (an "umbrella" organization for curatorial production, research, and publications), were you determined to create an infrastructure for the arts where there wasn't one? And does that go back to your feeling a responsibility for your generation?

XZ: From 1997 to 2006, artists didn't have places to exhibit in China. My conceiving of BizArt Art Center was to allow for as many projects as possible, promoting all kind of artists' activities, because we realized that artists need such open institutions to express their voices. After 2006, China's art market started to flourish as more and more galleries opened and artworks started to sell, and so the artist's working platform consciously turned toward the market, because it could support them for the first time. With the development of the Internet, the market progressively

became global, as information became more and more synchronized. These things could only happen because they were established on the basis of a newfound capitalism. And within three years, we established MadelN Company, the objective of which was to increase art "profits" through the company's operations—"profits" by virtue of combining quality, influence, market, and other elements. In this period when "products were exhibited and artworks sold," branding proved the most effective aspect of our creating new works. We created a model that has local characteristics and associated global experiences. At the same time, we kept evolving and created various models according to developing needs. The relationship between the climate and the company was similar to placing a piece of meat in front of someone who is starving. And at that moment, our first reaction was to create things, which was the luck of our generation of artists.

RP: Your colleague Alexia Dehaene explained the multiple meanings of MadelN as "without roof," as a reflection of your limitless ambitions for the company and your support of others. Is this all part of your altruistic vision for the arts in China?

XZ: Over the last 20 years, we have been pushing and stimulating the art environment, and until now we have always pushed values we believe in.

RP: How did you curate the Galerie Perrotin exhibition from your studio in Shanghai?

XZ: My colleague on site had first-hand understanding of the space—its size, architectural organization, and environment (including geographically and culturally)—and on that basis, I determined a concrete exhibition, deciding

Eternity—Tang Dynasty Bodhisattva of the Hebei Province Museum, Northern Qi Losana Buddha of the Longxing Temple, Bodhisattva of the Xiude Temple, West Pediment of the Temple of Aphaia, 2016. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, stainless steel, and granite, 88.19 x 150.38 x 55.13 in. Produced by MadelN Company.



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Evolution—Standing Female Attendant, Bini Mask, 2017. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, stainless steel, and gold leaf, 157.5 x 39.36 x 39.38 in. Produced by MadelN Company.

how to emphasize the meanings of the works while ensuring the visual effectiveness of the spaces. My work, as the artist, is to confirm the core of all these aspects, which I can then communicate with the team to realize the ideas. All of my exhibitions abroad are achieved through this process, so the geography of an exhibition isn't a problem for me.

RP: *Is the completion of a work only part of the process of considering how and where it fits into a larger exhibition?*

XZ: For me, these works aren't sculptures or paintings; they are objects of "information." Locations such as Beijing and Paris are another kind of information. When facing information as facts, there is no spatial distance. I first gain a complete understanding of the information, which eclipses a concrete period of time. Reality is only in the moment.

RP: *Could you explain the title "Civilization Iteration" in relation to cultural repetition?*

XZ: Civilization is a known experience. With technological development, these civilizational experiences are not enough; they have to be stimulated so that they don't become a museum's dead relics. "Iteration" is a certain method to obtain a desired goal through a repeated formula. With the Xu Zhen brand, such critical and cultural experiences are often used to produce a new aesthetic and knowledge. In this exhibition, various elements in the works come from existing civilizations—for example, a dragon from China's Five Dynasties, Buddhist sculptures, Japanese manga figurines, Brancusi's *Muse*, African sculptures. Our task is to bring these elements to life by altering their intrinsic values to create a new experience.

RP: *How do you understand critical and cultural exchanges?*

XZ: Cultural exchanges don't exist independently, from ancient times to nowadays; they are linked to politics, ideologies, ethnic identities, military affairs, and so on. Therefore cultural exchanges shouldn't be limited to "cultural exchanges."

RP: *Could you explain the contradictions and sexual references of the Evolution—Statue Mbole Ofika (2016) works, which combine the ritualistic traditions of African sculpture with hand-size kitsch Japanese dolls?*

XZ: From a certain point of view, these visual conflicts reach a harmony. Topics related to primitiveness and sexual aspects are only a small part of the work. The elements used in the work don't only represent a cultural phenomenon, they also relate to the human spirit. African cultural objects and Japanese manga constitute "totems" from various periods.

RP: *How much did you understand about African artifacts before you re-appropriated them? And how important is your use of mineral-based composite to the meaning and appearance of the work?*

XZ: I know about as much about African civilizations as the average person, therefore I can keep a certain feeling of "freshness," and I can also control the vulgarization of the information. Regarding the materials, mineral composite can imitate details of the wood used in African sculptures.

RP: *How did you decide on the violent juxtaposition in Eternity—Tang Dynasty Bodhisattva of the Hebei Province Museum, Northern Qi Losana Buddha of the Longxing Temple, Bodhisattva of the Xiude Temple, West Pediment of the Temple of Aphaia (2016)? One set of cultural icons almost wants to eliminate another.*

XZ: In these works, we combined beheaded Buddhist and Greek sculptures. It is possible that most viewers would consider this as a cultural conflict between East and West, but for me this is only a trigger. The most important aspect of the work is that it forms a particular kind of aesthetic. Nowadays this kind of aesthetic, from appearance to reception, is determined by a political anxiety forced by reality.

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Eternity—Six Dynasties Period Painted Earthenware Dragon, Sleeping Muse, 2016. Mineral-based composite, mineral pigments, and stainless steel, 77.94 x 47.25 x 98.44 in. Produced by MadelN Company.

RP: *The "Metal Language" series involves colored chains on glass. Why did you choose English to express your throwaway phrases?*

XZ: This series is related to another one called "Spread," which consists of fabric collages composed of elements from political cartoons from all over the world; as we collected them, we noticed that they were mostly in English. Therefore we extracted sentences and reproduced them using metal chains.

RP: *Are you celebrating free speech or exploring the futility of communicating by sound bites?*

XZ: The series emphasizes the necessity of language, and how much we depend on it. From this point of view, free and not free are similar.

RP: *What led you to combine a dragon with copies of Brancusi's Sleeping Muse in Eternity—Six Dynasties Period Painted Earthenware Dragon, Sleeping Muse (2016)? What determined the sizes, and is the work about ancient versus modern?*

XZ: The size of the sleeping muses is similar to that of the original. The connection between the dragon and the muse is similar to the one between a parent body and its eggs, as a symbol of life. Therefore we enlarged the dragon according to the size of the muse's head. When placed together, their relationship seems very natural, as if they were meant to be together. This is the aspect that we want to emphasize—how genes from different civilizations have been re-determined and re-combined.

RP: *With Evolution—Standing Female Attendant, Bini Mask (2017), modern research leads us to collages of images, information, and*

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cultures. Do you see such juxtapositions as the bastardization of everything valuable or an opportunity to create something new?

XZ: In the last two years, our creative process has resembled the decoding of cultural genes—we believe such an objective makes sense. Crucially, we started to create sculptural works with elements from different civilizations; by bringing such elements together, we wanted to emphasize the relationship between traditional culture and contemporary social experiences as a new combination of genes, which arrives at this kind of result. Before the Internet, anyone who wanted to know more about these cultures had to spend a huge amount of time researching in libraries, but nowadays it is very easy to see symbols and codes from various cultures. Because of this technological evolution, these types of creative works are quite natural for us.

RP: *MadelN Curved Vase—Blue-and-Jun Yao Glazed Lotus Seedpod Vase, Qianlong Period, Qing Dynasty (2014) might appear "floored," but was incredibly difficult to do. Is this a metaphor for an object becoming individual as opposed to the ceaseless repetition of something?*

XZ: Many ideas for works have come from my dreams.

RP: *What books are you are reading at the moment?*

XZ: I don't really read books in their entirety. I read information, parts, and extracts.

Rajesh Punj is a curator and writer based in London.